

In September 2014, President Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo offered amnesty to political opposition members, including exiled expatriates, in the lead up to his “national dialogue” with opposition parties. After opposition groups initially walked out of the November talks following Obiang’s denial that the government was holding political prisoners, discussions resumed. Participants, including 20 legal and nonlegal opposition parties and a handful of independent activists, agreed that month to several changes related to elections and political pluralism.

In an attempt to attract more diversified investment, Equatorial Guinea held an international conference in February 2014 and established a \$1 billion investment fund to spur growth beyond the energy sector.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

### **Political Rights: 1 / 40 [Key]**

#### **A. Electoral Process: 0 / 12**

President Obiang, Africa’s longest serving head of state and the leader of Equatorial Guinea since 1979, maintains an absolute grip on the country’s political and economic levers of power. Obiang is expected to run in the next presidential election, in November 2016.

Under constitutional reforms approved in a 2011 referendum, Equatorial Guinea replaced its unicameral system with a bicameral parliament consisting of a 70-seat Senate alongside a 100-seat Chamber of Deputies. Parliamentary and municipal elections were first held in 2013. Obiang’s Democratic Party of Equatorial Guinea (PDGE) won 54 of the 55 contested Senate seats (Obiang appointed the remaining 15 members); it also won 99 of the 100 seats in the lower house, the Chamber of Deputies. The Convergence for Social Democracy (CPDS), one of two opposition parties that independently contested the elections, took the two remaining parliamentary seats and the five local councilor slots that did not go to the ruling party in municipal elections.

Voting was held amid widespread reports of irregularities and intimidation of opposition members, and independent monitoring was very limited. Equatorial Guinea does not have an independent electoral body; the National Election Commission is led by the country’s interior minister, a prominent PDGE figure.

#### **B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 1 / 16**

Political opposition is limited and the regime keeps it under strict control. The CPDS, the primary opposition party, is routinely denied access to the media. Ten other officially recognized parties are aligned with the PDGE. Campaign funds mandated by the constitution are regularly delayed. The regime’s control of the media, judiciary, police, and military make it difficult for new opposition groups to take hold within the country. Opposition figures are often detained for indefinite periods without arrest warrants.

Opposition groups were cautiously optimistic following November 2014 national dialogue talks with Obiang. The government agreed to facilitate multiparty politics by relaxing existing rules for creating parties and monitoring regulations, including the elimination of the requirement that new political parties pay a

deposit of 30 million francs (\$50,000). The final agreement for pluralism reform was signed by 12 legally recognized political parties, 8 nonlegal opposition parties, and a handful of independent activists. It is not yet known if substantive reform will result from the talks.

### **C. Functioning of Government: 0 / 12**

Despite Obiang's public professions of democracy and good governance, movement toward these goals has been almost nonexistent, and graft is rampant. The government is marked by nepotism. Obiang's son Gabriel Mbega Obiang Lima is the country's oil minister. Obiang's eldest son, Teodoro "Teodorín" Nguema Obiang Mangué, was appointed second vice president in 2012 and is second in line for the presidency. Teodorín was the focus of a formal investigation into money-laundering allegations launched by France in March 2014. In October, the U.S. Justice Department announced a settlement with Teodorín that requires him to hand over assets worth approximately \$30 million gained through "bribes and kickbacks."

The budget process is opaque, and even the most basic information is difficult to find. The government signed an agreement with the World Bank in 2013 to help it establish a reliable statistical database. The government has spent lavishly on selected infrastructure projects over the past five years, including the controversial construction of a new national capital, Oyala; the new capital is located just west of Mongomo, the home city of Obiang and most of the rest of the political elite.

Equatorial Guinea is the third-largest oil producer in Sub-Saharan Africa and has the continent's highest per capita income, though three-quarters of the population lives below the poverty line. Oil revenues are in decline; Equatorial Guinea is the only African country out of 45 surveyed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) with a negative growth forecast in 2014 and 2015. The government generally negotiates directly with companies for oil concessions rather than awarding them on a competitive basis. Overtures toward a more open government are seen by many as part of Equatorial Guinea's efforts to attract international investment. Equatorial Guinea was delisted from the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative in 2010, and has not reapplied.

### **Civil Liberties: 7 / 60**

#### **D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 4 / 16**

Press freedom is severely limited, despite constitutional protections. Journalists consistently exercise self-censorship, and those who do criticize the president, his family, or the security forces face reprisals. Opposition party and exile group websites, along with Facebook, were blocked, presumably by the government, in the lead up to the 2013 elections. Libel remains a criminal offense. The handful of private newspapers and magazines face intense financial and political pressure and are unable to publish regularly. The government on occasion imposes news blackouts about subjects such as the Arab Spring uprisings and the 2014 resignation of long-time Burkina Faso president Blaise Compaoré. Online versions of Spanish newspapers are regularly blocked, especially *El País*. Less than a fifth of the population has access to the internet.

In January 2014, two reporters for the UK-based *Financial Times* with government-issued press credentials were arrested and held for three hours. Their recording equipment and laptops were confiscated and not returned.

The constitution protects religious freedom, though in practice it is sometimes affected by the country's broader political repression. Academic freedom is politically constrained, and self-censorship among faculty is common. There have been reports of university professors and teachers losing their positions due to their political affiliations. The government reportedly uses informants and electronic surveillance to monitor members of the opposition, nongovernmental organizations, and journalists, including the few members of the foreign press in the country.

## **E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 0 / 12**

Freedom of association and assembly are severely restricted, making it difficult for civil society groups and trade unions to operate. No independent human rights groups are legally represented in the country. Associations and political parties are required to register with the government through an onerous process.

The constitution provides for the right to organize unions, but many legal barriers exist to collective bargaining. While it has ratified key International Labour Organization conventions, the government has refused to register a number of trade unions. The country's only legal labor union is the Unionized Organization of Small Farmers.

## **F. Rule of Law: 0 / 16**

The judiciary is not independent, and judges in sensitive cases often consult with the office of the president before issuing a ruling. Under Article 85 of the constitution, the president is the nation's first magistrate. He also is in charge of the body that appoints judges.

The government continued its policy of arbitrary arrests and detentions without trial in 2014, often holding prisoners incommunicado and in secret. Torture and excessive force by the police occur routinely, and graft is endemic in the security forces. Military justice still operates under a system dating back to General Francisco Franco's rule in Spain (Equatorial Guinea's colonial ruler until 1968), and civilians may face trial in military courts for certain offenses. Prisons, several of which are located on military bases, are overcrowded and conditions are harsh. According to Human Rights Watch, Equatorial Guinea made "no progress" in carrying out human rights recommendations made under the UN Universal Periodic Review between 2009 and 2014.

Agustín Esono Nsogo, a teacher and relative of a cofounder of the opposition Popular Union of Equatorial Guinea party, was arrested in 2012 for alleged involvement in a coup plot and held until February 2014. During his imprisonment he suffered beatings that led to the loss of hearing in one ear. Cipriano Nguema Mba, a former military officer, was abducted during a personal visit to Nigeria in December 2013 and flown back to Equatorial Guinea on a government jet. In September 2014, he was sentenced to 27 years in prison for attempting a coup and trying to destabilize the government.

Amnesty International reported that at least four prisoners on death row were executed by firing squad in late January 2014, the first executions since 2010. Less than a month later, the government declared a moratorium on executions, a condition of joining the Community of Portuguese Language Countries.

In September 2014, Obiang announced a general amnesty for political prisoners in the lead up to November political talks. Opposition figures said no prisoners were released, but the government claimed

that those still in prison were criminals, not political prisoners.

The principal ethnic minority is the Bubi, who are indigenous to Bioko Island, where the capital is located. Bubi suffer persistent societal discrimination.

While discrimination and stigma against LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) individuals exists, homosexuality is not illegal.

## **G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 3 / 16**

Freedom of movement is protected by law but restricted in practice by measures such as police checkpoints, which often require paying of bribes. Authorities have also denied opposition members reentry to the country from abroad.

Equatorial Guinea has one of the most difficult business environments in the world. According to the World Bank's 2015 *Doing Business* report, the country required 18 steps and 135 days to start a business, ranking it 186 among 189 countries.

Constitutional and legal guarantees of equality for women are largely ignored, although women won 22 percent of the seats in the Chamber of Deputies in the 2013 elections. Violence against women is reportedly widespread.

The U.S. State Department's 2014 *Trafficking in Persons Report* found Equatorial Guinea to be a source and destination country for women and children trafficked for the purposes of forced labor and prostitution, particularly in Malabo and in Bata.

### **Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)**

**X = Score Received**

**Y = Best Possible Score**

**Z = Change from Previous Year**

**[Full Methodology](#)**